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Südostasien sehen / South-East Asia Visually

Thai Communities in Vienna

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This article provides a short overview on Thais in Vienna, offering some selected impressions of the second largest South-East Asian community in Austria. For a long time immigrants have mainly been portrayed as cheap labour force and low-skilled workers who were recruited in order to counter the problem of labour shortage in Austria (Castles & Miller, 2003; Mayer, 2010). Indeed, immigrants from all over the world have shaped the appearance and development of Vienna for centuries. In this context, not much is known about South-East Asian communities in Vienna. Official data of *Statistik Austria* (2010a) registered 22,551 South-East Asians in Austria, with more than half of them living in Vienna. This number includes persons who hold a South-East Asian citizenship (whether they were born in Austria or abroad) as well as persons who were born in South-East Asia but now hold Austrian citizenship.

As Table 1 shows, immigrant groups from the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam constitute 91.6 percent of the South-East Asian population in Vienna. The population structure of Thais in Austria, however, differs from the general pattern of the South-East Asian groups.

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Table 1: Number of South-East Asians in Vienna 2010

	South-East Asian Population		South-East Asian Citizens			Born Abroad but Austrian Citizenship
	total	percent	total	foreign born	born in Austria	total
South-East Asia	12,589	100	5,410	5,000	410	7,179
Brunei Darussalam	2	0.0	2	2	0	0
Indonesia	480	3.8	306	285	21	174
Cambodia	232	1.8	41	39	2	191
Laos PDR	56	0.4	9	9	0	47
Malaysia	160	1.3	117	109	8	43
Myanmar (Burma)	26	0.2	18	17	1	8
Timor-Leste	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
Philippines	8,786	69.8	3,386	3,073	313	5,400
Singapore	97	0.8	62	60	2	35
Thailand	1,481	11.8	1,107	1,066	41	374
Vietnam	1,269	10.1	362	340	22	907

Source: Statistik Austria (2010a)

Thais in Vienna

In the following we bring to light some characteristics and manifestations of Thai communities in Vienna by outlining the importance of bi-national marriages, student migration, immigrant businesses, and cultural-religious activities. We are aware, however, that the illustrations presented provide only a sketch of this heterogeneous group.

Statistik Austria (2010a) registered almost 5,000 Thais in Austria but less than 1,500, or 30 percent, are living in the capital city. The majority of the Thai population in Vienna is female as the gender ratio of 100 : 416 (male : female) demonstrates; a pattern that contradicts common images of male-dominated international migration. The main reason for this structure lies in the marriage-motivated migration of Thai females. Using the weighted data of the Austrian sample census 2010³, *Statistik Austria* (2010b) calculated approximately 2,500 bi-national couples consisting of a Thai(-born)

³ Due to the small sample, generalisations on the federal level are not possible. Also note that these numbers only include marriages that are registered in Austria



PHOTO LEFT: Bi-national marriages have played an important role in migration to Austria. PHOTO RIGHT: Entrepreneurial activities of Thai immigrants are not limited to restaurants, food shops, karaoke bars, or massage parlours. Also, Thai pantomime artists gain the attention of domestic and international tourists.



PHOTO LEFT: Traditional Thai massage in Vienna becomes increasingly popular. This is the newest of 16 officially registered Thai massage parlors in Vienna (Official of Office of Commercial Affairs of the Royal Thai Embassy in Vienna, personal communication, 16 March 2011). PHOTO RIGHT: *Talad Thai* which literally means Thai market opened in 2002. Thai products such as curry pastes, instant noodles, Thai beer as well as fresh Thai herbs or vegetables are requested by Thai and Austrian clients.

wife and an Austrian(-born) husband. This means that more than 60 percent of Thai women in Austria are married to Austrian men. However, since Austria has introduced ever more obstacles for bi-national partnerships (a higher requisite net-income and German language qualifications prior to arrival in Austria⁴ among others), the number of marriages between Austrians and so called third-country nationals have decreased.

Another group are Thai students living in Vienna. According to the Royal Thai Embassy in Austria, approximately 60-70 Thai students (including visiting students and guest researchers) are enrolled at different university programs in Vienna (Embassy official, personal communication, 3 May 2011). International higher education



PHOTO LEFT: *Visakha Bucha Day* at *Wat Yansangvorn*: This 'Triple Anniversary Day' is the most important Buddhist religious festival as it commemorates the birth, death and enlightenment of the Buddha. The event takes place at the full moon of the sixth lunar which usually falls in May. PHOTO RIGHT: Inside *Siam Restaurant*: The first Thai restaurant in Vienna was opened 35 years ago by the same owner who is now running the *Siam Restaurant*. Both, Thais and Austrians, benefit from the urban culinary diversity offered by Thai entrepreneurs.

⁴ This regulation will become effective this year (2011).



Vienna's second Thai Buddhist temple, *Wat Tham-nurak*, organised the religious and social activities for this year's Thai New Year Festival. *Songkran*, the beginning of the Thai New Year, is celebrated in mid-April according to the Thai lunar calendar. While in Thailand Buddhist monks, Buddha images, and various offerings are paraded in a procession through the streets, members of the Thai community in Vienna rent an event location in a community college (*Volkshochschule*) in order to carry out ceremonies and celebrations. Thais and Austrians were invited to join the parade and the Buddhist ceremonies. In the lobby of the community college visitors could buy Thai food, drinks and even Thai *sarongs* (wrap-around skirts).

The festivity started at nine o'clock in the morning and lasted until after midnight. In daytime, Buddhist praying, offerings and processions occupied the centre stage while in the evening a Thai rock star was entertaining the audience. This year, approximately 200 visitors joined the festivities in Vienna even though many Thai people went back to Thailand in order to celebrate with their families.

enhances social status and increases professional business opportunities. Many Thai students believe that the qualitative level and especially the status of a European university are higher than that of their home universities. Many Thai students in Vienna receive a scholarship which is bound to study results and the minimum duration of study. Their social environment mainly consists of Thai and other foreign students as it is found to be difficult to build friendships with Austrians within such a relatively short time.

The most popular and obvious manifestation of Thailand in Vienna can be found in immigrant businesses, especially in restaurants, food shops and traditional massage parlours. The Office of Commercial Affairs of the Royal Thai Embassy in Vienna (2011) has registered 35 Thai restaurants in Austria, of which 20 are located in Vienna. The existing Thai businesses in the form of restaurants, food shops, or massage parlours not only enhance the exotic appearance of Austria's capital, but also reflect two ongoing developments: First, the rise of and the quest for exotic and 'exotised' entrepreneurial activities; second, the deepening transnational links between Thailand and Austria. Thai restaurants are visited by both Thai and Austrian customers. However, there are more Austrian than Thai guests as the latter prefer to cook for themselves and eat at home. One restaurant owner reported that she prefers to employ Thai staff for two reasons. First, she wants to support Thai people in Vienna and second, it is easier to communicate with co-nationals.

Thai Buddhist temples (*Wat*) are places of both religious and social activities. Thailand counts several thousand temples, many of them running libraries as well as schools which are located in the temple compound. Temples in Thailand are architecturally rich with an abundance of styles; in Vienna, however, one can find 'only' two Thai Buddhist temples with rather basic architecture.



PHOTO LEFT: Inside Wat Thamnurak: After offering the food to the monk, the meal is shared among the temple visitors. PHOTO RIGHT: Entrance door of Wat Thamnurak: As the temple is located in an apartment building, the outer facade looks rather unspectacular for a Wat.



PHOTO LEFT: Inside Wat Yansangworn: This temple opened in the year 2000 as Vienna's first Thai Buddhist temple. PHOTO RIGHT: The Buddhist temples in Vienna are mainly visited by Thai females and are most frequented on weekends and holidays.

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